

May 2024

A BEST PRACTICES ANALYSIS: INCREASING CALFRESH ENROLLMENT AND IMPROVING EQUITY AMONG SSI RECIPIENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides a comprehensive best practices analysis for increasing CalFresh¹ uptake in California, with a particular focus on Supplemental Security Income (SSI) recipients. Prior to 2019, SSI recipients were excluded from receiving CalFresh due to a “cash-out” policy dating back to 1974. The implementation of Assembly Bill 1811 in 2019 marked a significant shift by making SSI beneficiaries eligible for CalFresh. Since then, California has made strides in increasing CalFresh uptake within this population, but there is room to grow. This report uses existing literature and qualitative research in the form of interviews to try to demystify the current barriers preventing California from increasing its CalFresh uptake among SSI recipients (with particular emphasis on Spanish speakers and adults with disabilities). These barriers are categorized as access barriers, process barriers, or administrative barriers. Access barriers included physical access and transportation, access to accurate information, stigma related to accessing benefits, language-related barriers, and immigration-related concerns. Process barriers consisted of procedural denials, poor customer service, and issues related to digital literacy. Finally, administrative barriers included a lack of county interconnectedness and low staff capacity and bandwidth. Our report uses these findings to provide stakeholders with strategic practices and policy recommendations to increase uptake.

To address these issues, the report recommends standardizing administrative access, improving data matching for targeted enrollment, and fostering closer cooperation between Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) and county administrations. It also emphasizes the need for enhanced customer service through better staff training in cultural competence and empathy. Furthermore, innovative outreach strategies are suggested to effectively engage SSI recipients, utilizing community centers and local clinics as key information dissemination points. Legislative recommendations include increasing the minimum CalFresh benefit to make the application process more appealing, extending interview waivers to reduce procedural burdens, and implementing a Combined Application Project to streamline enrollment processes and reduce administrative costs. This comprehensive approach aims to close the current enrollment gaps, ensuring that CalFresh reaches those most in need and contributing to a healthier, more equitable community.

Although California has made great strides in CalFresh uptake among SSI recipients, some barriers still exist, as illuminated by our research and analysis. We underscore the need for a concerted effort by all stakeholders—state agencies, county offices, and CBOs—to address these barriers through targeted interventions and strategic reforms. Through these efforts presented in this report, California can ensure that CalFresh benefits are accessible to those who need them most, contributing to a healthier, more equitable community.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our sincere gratitude to everyone who contributed to the creation of this best practices analysis report. Special thanks go to Diana Jensen, Gabby Davidson, and Becky Silva, whose expertise and insights not only enriched the quality and depth of our analysis but were also instrumental in the data compilation that forms the core of this paper. We are particularly thankful to Professor Mia Bird for her meticulous review and constructive feedback, which were crucial in enhancing the final output. Most importantly, our most profound appreciation goes to all our interviewees, whose firsthand experiences and perspectives are invaluable to our analysis. Their openness and willingness to share their knowledge have profoundly informed our understanding and significantly shaped the recommendations outlined in this report.

This report is the product of a collaborative effort, and its conclusions are richer for the wide range of perspectives and expertise offered by all contributors.



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DIANA JENSEN
CONSULTING SERVICES



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SECOND HARVEST
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CWDA
Advancing Human Services
for the Welfare of All Californians



**Silicon Valley
Independent Living Center**
*a disability justice organization
that creates fully inclusive communities*



FIND
FOOD BANK

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CAFB: California Association of Food Banks

CAP: Combined Application Project

CBO: Community-Based Organizations

CDSS: California Department of Social Services

CWDA: County Welfare Directors Association of California

DMV: Department of Motor Vehicles

DTA: Department of Transitional Assistance

ESAP: Elderly Simplified Application Project

MAOF: Mexican American Opportunity Foundation

SNAP: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

SSA: Social Security Administration

SSI: Supplemental Security Income

SSP: State Supplementary Payment

USDA: U.S. Department of Agriculture

INTRODUCTION

Report Structure

The beginning of this report outlines the basic history of CalFresh, eligibility, the landscape of its administration status in California, followed by the role that CBOs play in relation to CalFresh. We then discuss our problem definition, objectives, approach, and methodology. Due to the complexity and scale of our research topic, we approached our analysis through a county, subpopulation, and stakeholder lenses, which helped guide the questions and approach for our interviews. We also hope to set the stage for recommendations based on the current state of the three central systems and their integrated efforts. In addition to these three sections, we carefully examine two subpopulations: Spanish speakers and persons with disabilities. To begin, we identify barriers faced within these subpopulations, noting that although these barriers particularly impact these populations, some reflect a greater systemic problem affecting all communities. We then map our identified best practices, recommendations, and legislative recommendations for these different stakeholder groups based on our findings from our research and interviews.

Background

The History of CalFresh Eligibility in California

In June 2019, California extended CalFresh eligibility to SSI beneficiaries through Assembly Bill (AB) 1811, marking a transformative shift. SSI is a safety net program administered by the Social Security Administration (SSA) that provides monthly payments to older adults and people with disabilities with limited other income or resources. California has by far the largest number of SSI recipients, and as of January 2024, there were 1,116,044 people enrolled in California, representing just over 15% of total recipients nationwide (Social Security Administration, 2024). Before the eligibility expansion, individuals receiving SSI in California were systematically barred from obtaining these benefits. This exclusion can be traced back to 1974 with the establishment of SSI as a federal cash assistance scheme. Faced with a decision, California chose to "cash out" CalFresh benefits for SSI recipients, aiming to reduce administrative expenses. As a result, SSI beneficiaries received a nominal \$10 increase in their benefits as a substitute for CalFresh access, irrespective of their actual eligibility for CalFresh. California was the last state to maintain the cash out of CalFresh benefits.

In California, households with at least one member who is elderly or disabled are not subject to resource or gross monthly income limits for CalFresh. For such households, eligibility is assessed based only on net mo-

-nthly income or a family's income minus their allowable deductions. These deductions can include certain medical expenses, child or dependent care costs, and housing costs that are in excess of a certain threshold. To qualify for CalFresh, SSI recipients must belong to a household whose net income is below 100% of the poverty line (LSNC a., n.d.). The income eligibility threshold, the list of allowable deductions, and how these deductions are calculated can significantly impact eligibility and benefit levels.

County Administered Status

California is distinct from most other states in how it operates its SNAP program in several key ways. For one, a defining feature of the management of CalFresh in California, including for SSI recipients, is the state's status as a county-administered system. This means that individual counties bear responsibility for managing CalFresh operations, which includes processing applications, determining eligibility, distributing benefits, and providing support services. California is one of ten states that delegate SNAP administration to the county level; taken together, these states represent thirty-two percent of the nation's SNAP beneficiaries (National Association of Counties, 2019). In such states, counties must often allocate substantial local resources to support the program's operation.

Each county welfare office is responsible for outreach and administering the program, which can significantly impact customer services. While all counties abide by the same rules and regulations set by the state, each county has different practices and policies and might also have more or less resources devoted



“There are 58 wildly different experiences in some cases, and being able to talk through those live has been really great ... we were doing a lot of work in the roundtables with the toolkits rolling out ... (and) that was our forum to engage directly with the counties who were doing the work.”

-Brian Kaiser, California Department of Social Services

to enrollment efforts. Given California's status as a county-administered state, the 2019 eligibility expansion relied heavily on partnerships between the state and county officials to conduct effective outreach. The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) collaborated with stakeholders, including county administrators, to align policy guidance and technological implementation in addition to addressing ad hoc operational issues (Jensen, 2022). The effective rollout of the eligibility expansion contributed to the enrollment of nearly 600,000 SSI recipients, or 49 percent of the state's SSI population by June 2021 (Jensen, 2022). Some of the successful strategies leveraged by the state included ensuring that outreach materials were multilingual, disseminating high-quality informational material mailed to individuals, and leveraging roundtables with county stakeholders to discuss outreach strategies and state expectations.²

Combined Application Project Status

Under federal law, SSI applicants are entitled to concurrently apply for SNAP when they apply for SSI (Negoita et al., 2022). Moreover,

households that are exclusively made up of SSI recipients are categorically eligible for SNAP (Trenkamp and Wiseman, 2017). However, in practice, the application process does not always operate as intended, and even those residing in “pure SSI households,” are not universally enrolled. To streamline SNAP access for seniors and people with disabilities, states can implement a Combined Application Project (CAP). CAP programs facilitate the automatic enrollment of SSI beneficiaries in SNAP, overcoming administrative and other barriers for these vulnerable populations (Weinstein-Tull and Jones, 2017). California does not currently operate such a program, but could with a waiver from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA).

CAPs were first implemented in 1995 and are present in seventeen states, including Arizona, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Virginia, and Washington (Weinstein-Tull and Jones, 2017; Negoita et al., 2022).

Among States that have implemented a CAP, there is significant variation in how eligibility and benefits are assessed. Under a “standard” model, which is used by Mississippi, New York, South Carolina, and Washington, state agencies collaborate directly with SSA (Weinstein-Tull and Jones, 2017). When applying for SSI benefits, individuals are asked at the SSA office if they would like to also apply for SNAP. If they accept, their information is directly transferred to the

state agency. Those who qualify receive benefits without needing to contact a state or county office. Under a standard CAP, only those in a single household or who prepare food by themselves are eligible. Standard CAP states also aim to enroll existing SSI participants who do not currently receive SNAP through targeted outreach such as mailers.

Other CAP states, like Texas, receive data from SSA on newly enrolled SSI recipients. The state agency then determines individuals' SNAP eligibility and sends them a simplified application, which recipients must complete to receive benefits (Weinstein-Tull and Jones, 2017).

Most CAP states also establish a range of standard benefit levels that typically depend upon shelter costs and, in some cases, unearned income. Generally, SSI recipients enrolled in a CAP receive benefits that are on par with or slightly greater than they otherwise would have received (Weinstein-Tull and Jones, 2017).

South Carolina Case Study

An evaluation of South Carolina’s utilization of CAP between 1994 and 1998 found the rate of SNAP participation among SSI recipients in the state rose from 38% to 50%. This is especially notable given that during this period, the national participation rate fell from 42% to 38% (Decision Information Resources, Inc. 2017). Additionally, the program was estimated to save the South Carolina Department of Social Services approximately \$575,000 annually in administrative costs (Ibid). A significant majority of new SSI

applicants, nearly 80%, reported finding the SNAP application process to be straightforward or moderately easy (Ibid). More generally, from 2000 to 2008, there was a 48% growth in SNAP participation within one-person SSI households across all states that had adopted CAPs (Dorn and Huber, 2014).

Massachusetts Case Study

Massachusetts implemented its successful CAP, also known as Bay State CAP, in 2005, which streamlines access to food assistance for SSI recipients residing in pure SSI households (Weinstein-Tull and Jones, 2017). Bay State CAP leverages the SSI application or redetermination process to verify individuals' eligibility for food assistance eligibility and renewals. SSA facilitates this process by transmitting the necessary data to the state's Department of Transitional Assistance (DTA) through a State Data Exchange. This eliminates any need for applicants to submit additional documentation. Those qualifying can receive up to \$194 monthly in food assistance and must undergo recertification every three years, coinciding with their eligibility review.

Generally, the application timeline for Bay State CAP aligns with the SSI application approval or redetermination dates. Food assistance benefits are disbursed the month following SSI approval without any prorated adjustments. Those residing in pure SSI households who do not meet Bay State CAP eligibility criteria may still apply for SNAP benefits directly through the SSA. This approach enables those in pure SSI households to select the assistance program that best aligns with their circumstances.

Transition to CalSAWS

Recently, California has migrated its technology software systems for eligibility determination and benefits calculation to a single integrated system: the Statewide Automated Welfare System, or CalSAWS. As of November 2023, all California counties have completed the transition to utilizing this new system along with the public-facing BenefitsCal website (CAFB, n.d.). The newly integrated BenefitsCal website enables people to apply for, manage, and renew benefits for a host of social safety net programs, including CalFresh, Medi-Cal, and CalWORKs (Western Center on Law & Poverty, n.d.). Previously, counties relied on three distinct technology systems—CalWIN, C-IV, and LRS—each of which had its own public application portal. Additionally, until 2019, the GetCalFresh.org (GCF) website was only available in some counties. GCF is designed and operated by the non-profit organization Code For America (CFA), which contracts with California to provide this service. In anticipation of the SSI expansion in 2019, CDSS facilitated the extension of GetCalFresh to all counties. GetCalFresh is still operating in all counties until it sunsets in 2025. The transition to CalSAWS has the potential to impact accessibility, application time, and ease with which individuals can verify their benefit eligibility.

“(Sacramento) is the last county (to migrate to CalSAWS) ... and our county is still struggling to adapt to that new system. Let's just say that workers have a really hard time. It's just taking a while ... trying to get the kinks worked out.” -
Amy Dierlam, River City Food Bank.

The Role of CBOs

As part of CalFresh expansion efforts, counties and CBOs collaborated on multifaceted outreach campaigns, leveraging banners, mailers, and partnerships with other governmental agencies, including SSA, to raise awareness about CalFresh eligibility for SSI recipients. These efforts have been made in an effort to close significant gaps for subpopulations who are under enrolled below the State average. Notably, CBOs employed person-centered approaches at meal sites and food banks to foster trust and elucidate the CalFresh expansion details to SSI recipients. They often offer community members end-to-end application help, ensuring that they receive their benefits. CBOs are integral to community engagement and participation in welfare programs (NFF, 2021). CBOs and their networks serve as lead advocates for their communities, often championing local causes and addressing specific gaps in niche areas.

The underlying issue often ties back to the culture within these organizations, where procedural compliance overshadows client experience. Jenn Tracy from JTracy Consulting also emphasizes the importance of CBOs in assisting applicants. CBOs often act as intermediaries, helping applicants navigate the complex processes and offering a more personable approach that many government offices lack. This support is crucial, especially when administrative systems prioritize efficiency over empathy.

Problem Definition

Despite these efforts, the uptake of CalFresh among SSI recipients remains uneven. Research and data indicate disparities in enrollment, highlighting the necessity for intensified outreach to communities facing language barriers and those with mobility and cognitive challenges. Navigating complex administrative procedures often deters eligible individuals from accessing benefits. Transaction costs, stigma, technological barriers, and limited information access further impede participation in CalFresh and other assistance programs (Cha & Escarce, 2022; Saucedo, 2021). McDaniel et al.'s 2023 study revealed persistent enrollment challenges and disparities, particularly among Hispanic/Latinx communities and people with disabilities, underscoring long-standing inequities in program access and treatment. For many SSI beneficiaries, the monthly benefits fall short of meeting basic needs, leading them to seek additional public assistance. This struggle is exacerbated in high-cost regions like California. Therefore, it is essential to deepen our understanding of the challenges faced by these vulnerable populations, gather insights on best practices from agencies directly involved in their support, and use this information to guide policymakers, state organizations, and CBOs.

As of February 2023, only 61% of SSI recipients are enrolled in CalFresh, which is well below the national average of 66% (excluding California) (Jensen, 2023). There is a great deal of variation in enrollment rates across different counties and among different SSI subgroups. Due to the nature of the program, SSI recipients face many particular barriers to accessing benefits related to age, disability,

language, and having limited economic resources. To increase enrollment, it will be necessary to understand how to address these barriers and what factors led to different counties and subgroups having more or less success.

County Focus

To understand the challenge of increasing CalFresh enrollment for SSI recipients in California, it is essential to understand where the state's SSI population is concentrated and how enrollment rates vary across counties. Statewide data that include county breakdowns on SSI recipients is released by SSA annually, and at the time of this report, the most recent statistics available were from December 2022. Of the 1,132,390 SSI recipients in California, just over 75% (851,430) live in 10 counties, ranging from 37,510 in San Francisco to 356,975 in Los Angeles (SSA, 2022). Additionally, of these ten counties, each county's SSI population has different proportions of the three SSI groups: disabled children under age 18, disabled adults ages 18-64, and adults ages 65+. **Table 1** below lists the county, total SSI population, percent of state SSI population, and SSI group breakdown.

County Enrollment Rates

As with their SSI population, there is also significant variation in CalFresh enrollment rates across the top 10 counties. Enrollment rates in these counties range from 50% in Riverside to 79% in San Francisco (Jensen, 2023). Of the ten, five have enrollment rates above the state average (Los Angeles, Sacramento, Alameda, Santa Clara, and San Francisco), and five have enrollment rates

below (San Diego, San Bernardino, Riverside, and Fresno). While progress in increasing enrollment has continued at a fairly uniform rate across these counties and the state from 2021 to 2023, only San Francisco (79%) and Los Angeles (67%) have enrollment rates above the national average highlighting the importance of better understanding barriers to enrollment for this population. **Figure 1** below compares CalFresh enrollment rates for SSI recipients from June 2021 to February 2023 across the top SSI counties as well as statewide.

In order to bring California's overall enrollment rate up to the national average of 66%, the state will need to enroll a further 54,500 SSI recipients (Jensen, 2023). As the state seeks to achieve this goal, we believe that specific focus should be placed on these ten counties as they not only represent the greatest share of SSI recipients that still need to be reached (San Francisco and Los Angeles excluded), but due to the diversity of their SSI populations and current enrollment rates, also offer valuable insight into common challenges and successful strategies that can be used to reach this population.

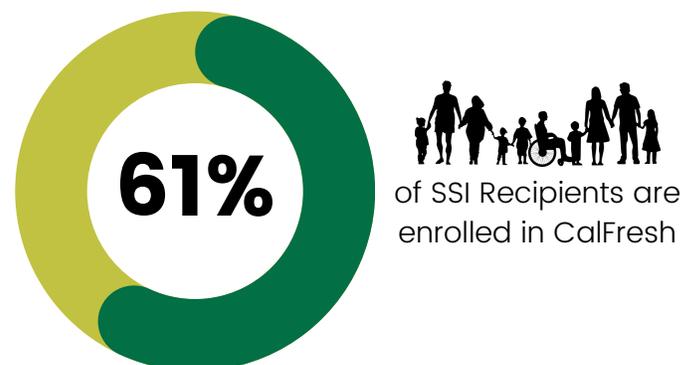
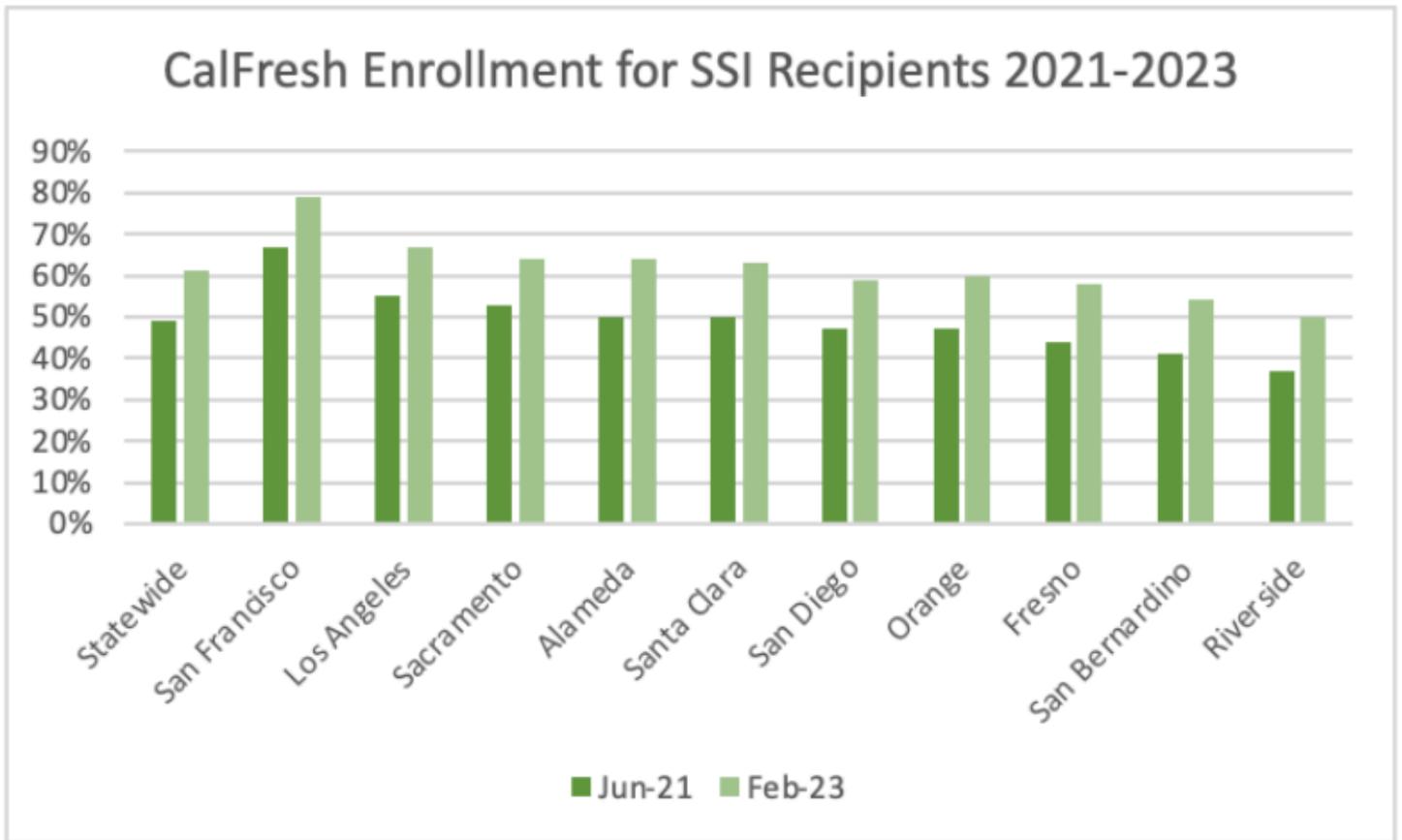


TABLE 1: SSI ENROLLMENT BY COUNTY AND AGE GROUP

County	SSI Population (December 2022)	Percent of State SSI Population	Percent of SSI Beneficiaries Under 18	Percent of SSI Beneficiaries 18-64	Percent of SSI Beneficiaries 65+
Los Angeles	356,975	32.5%	7.2%	35.2%	57.6%
San Diego	75,370	6.7%	6.2%	42.5%	51.1%
Orange	69,746	6.2%	6.7%	29.5%	63.7%
San Bernardino	66,013	5.8%	10.5%	50.4%	39%
Sacramento	60,112	5.3%	7.5%	47.9%	44.6%
Riverside	60,008	5.3%	10.1%	47.6%	32.3%
Alameda	44,896	4%	4.9%	39%	56.1%
Fresno	40,723	3.6%	10.4%	46.3%	43.3%
Santa Clara	40,467	3.6%	4.1%	30%	65.9%
San Francisco	37,510	3.3%	1.3%	27.1%	71.6%

Figure 1: CalFresh Enrollment for SSI Recipients



PROJECT OBJECTIVES

Through a best practices analysis, we aim to understand variation in enrollment rates across states, counties, and subgroups and identify successful strategies that can be implemented to increase overall enrollment for SSI recipients in California. Specifically, we identified best practices that can be employed to raise these enrollment levels, with specific emphasis on Spanish speakers and adults with disabilities. Through our findings, we discovered that many of our recommendations not only apply to these communities but also address more prominent systemic barriers faced by all communities. The primary target audience for this report is the California Association of Food Banks (CAFB), with the intention that relevant recommendations for administrative or legislative solutions can be incorporated into their advocacy agenda. Our best practices identified are ones that can be utilized by CAFB, their partner organizations, and advocates for Supplemental Security Income and CalFresh.



METHODOLOGY

Our study focuses on the qualitative analysis of issue area expert interviews held over the course of 8 weeks. Of the 18 interviews, we interviewed four California food banks, nine non-profit organizations, and five county and state-level organizations and representatives representing San Francisco, Alameda, Sacramento, Santa Clara, Los Angeles, San Diego, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties. We carefully crafted each interview to optimize the expertise of these experts. By conducting these qualitative interviews and analyzing available resources, we understood the current barriers inhibiting a more robust enrollment of SSI recipients in CalFresh and the best practices that can be translated to different contexts with the greatest promise of boosting enrollment. **Our focus was to identify the key challenges and best practices through a county, subpopulation, and stakeholder lens**, particularly on adults with disabilities and Spanish speakers.⁴

Compiled throughout this report, we develop a comprehensive understanding of these programs' historical background, current policies, and latest outreach efforts. By reviewing the relevant historical data, we gain valuable insights into their evolution and identify any notable patterns or trends that may have shaped their current status. Additionally, examining the current policies and outreach efforts of CalFresh and SSI provided us with a clear picture of the current landscape.

Rationale for Subpopulation Lenses

In this section, we will delve into the rationale behind enhancing CalFresh enrollment among Spanish speakers and adults with disabilities, the two subpopulations for which SSI participant CalFresh enrollment rates are lowest. Throughout this report, we will reference challenges that are specific to these communities. However, we understand that these challenges highlight significant failures in this system that are applicable to all SSI recipients. We hope that in spotlighting these subpopulations, we will help increase awareness and equity for these communities.

Spanish Speakers

Hispanic households experience higher rates of food insecurity and are more likely to suffer from food insecurity than white households in California (CAFB, 2024). Although Hispanics are more likely to enroll in social assistance programs relative to their population size compared to non-Hispanics and other ethnic minorities, their level of participation is significantly shaped by their legal status and the prevailing cultural views on immigration (Elkaramany & Edwards, 2023). Spanish speakers represent one of the largest underrepresented groups of CalFresh recipients receiving SSI. In California, only 49% of Spanish-speaking SSI recipients are enrolled in CalFresh, approximately 12 percentage points below the state average and 17 percentage points below the national

average, according to the CalFresh Participation for SSI Recipients Interactive Dashboard (Jensen, 2023). A study by McDaniel et al. found that nearly half of Hispanic/Latino adults encountered at least one obstacle when enrolling in the SNAP, in contrast to 39.8% of White adults and 31.8% of Black adults (2023). Addressing this disparity and increasing enrollment to match the statewide average would enable an additional 65,260 people to receive benefits, generating about \$82.7 million in annual benefits. Therefore, understanding the unique challenges faced by this population is crucial for developing more effective outreach and support strategies.

Adults with Disabilities

Individuals with disabilities face significantly higher rates of poverty, material hardship, and food insecurity compared to the general population (Carlson et al., 2017; Guo et al., 2019; Coleman-Jensen & Nord, 2013). The nexus between disability and food insecurity is well-documented, with financial strain being a major contributing factor. However, other issues, such as physical barriers to accessing food, time constraints due to personal or caregiver responsibilities, and elevated healthcare costs, further exacerbate food insecurity among this group (Guo et al., 2019). Intellectual and developmental disabilities, in particular, show a pronounced disparity in food security levels. Despite the significant need, individuals with disabilities often face challenges in accessing food assistance programs like CalFresh due to both systemic and procedural barriers (Guo et al., 2019). There are many efforts that have been made to mitigate the challenges

often faced by people with disabilities when applying for food assistance programs. Counties are mandated to provide reasonable accommodations to ensure that persons with disabilities have equal access to state and federally-funded programs, requiring documentation of all accommodation requests and actions taken. However, the implementation of these⁵ accommodations often falls short, leaving many eligible individuals without necessary support. Moreover, adults with disabilities constitute nearly 42 percent of all SSI recipients in California (SSA, 2022). However, only 55% of those aged 18 to 59 are enrolled in CalFresh—below the state and national averages (Jensen, 2023).

Enhancing support for adults with disabilities in accessing CalFresh presents an opportunity for significant progress. By aligning its enrollment rates with state averages, California could add an estimated 41,260 new enrollees, moving toward becoming a leader in SNAP enrollment among SSI recipients (Jensen, 2023). Implementing targeted strategies to improve access and treatment in SNAP applications is essential for addressing these long-standing inequities and ensuring that all individuals have the resources they need for food security.

Limitation Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the time and interview constraints of our methodology but maintain significance due to the nature of our best practices approach. Our analysis lacks a comprehensive state-level examination due to our time limitations. Additionally, the absence of direct access to recipient perspectives and limited engagement with county and Social Security office stakeholders impeded our ability to

thoroughly assess outreach efforts. Moving forward, addressing these limitations will be pivotal in crafting practical solutions at the county, state legislative, and CBO levels to ensure equitable access to CalFresh benefits for all eligible individuals.

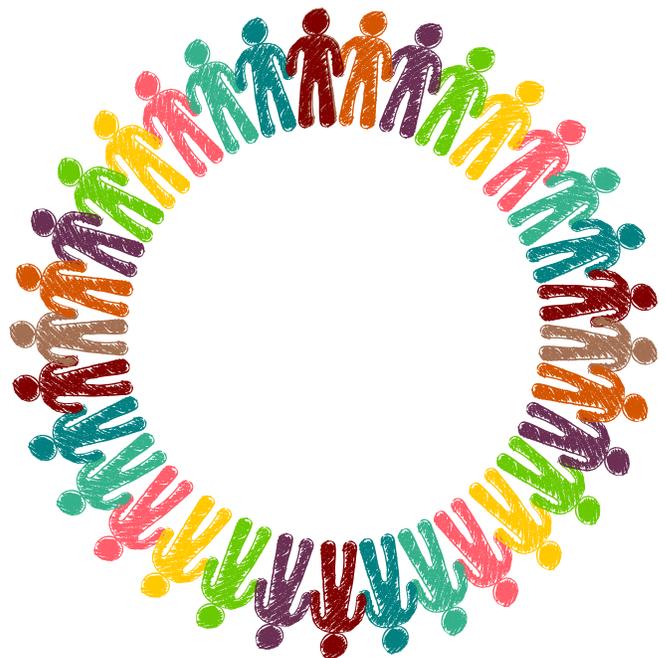
This report aims to highlight the lived experiences and challenges of those directly affected by the welfare system to guarantee equitable access. Our primary objective is to create a report synthesizing strategic ways California can increase its CalFresh recipient levels among SSI recipients. Our best practices identified are ones that can be utilized by CAFB, their partner organizations, and advocates for SSI and CalFresh.

Research Limitations on Disabled Adults

We acknowledge the limitations in existing research regarding the experiences of individuals with disabilities when applying for CalFresh. Coleman-Jensen and Nord (2013) noted that there is a scarcity of data specifically addressing how different types of disabilities impact the application process for food assistance programs. Most existing studies have concentrated on work-limiting disabilities, which does not fully capture the diverse spectrum of disabilities that can affect individuals. This approach tends to underestimate the total population of people with disabilities, thereby limiting our understanding of their needs and challenges. Furthermore, the relationship between disability and food insecurity appears to vary significantly depending on the type of disability.

Our literature review suggests that individuals with vision, mental, and physical disabilities face disproportionately higher odds of experiencing food insecurity compared to those with other types of disabilities. This disparity is likely exacerbated by the high costs associated with assistive and adaptive equipment, which are not always accounted for in studies focused primarily on work limitations.

This gap in research underscores the need for more comprehensive studies that consider the full range of disabilities and their unique impacts on access to food assistance programs. By broadening the scope of research to include all types of disabilities, policymakers and community organizations can better tailor their programs to meet the diverse needs of this population.



CHALLENGES

We divide our challenges to CalFresh uptake for SSI recipients into three types of barriers: access barriers, process barriers, and administrative barriers. Access barriers are defined by client-facing interactions that deter recipients from beginning the application process. Process barriers are defined by client-facing interactions that deter recipients from finishing the application process. Lastly, administrative barriers are defined by back-end public agencies and CBO challenges.

Access Barriers



A Psychological Challenge: The Impact of Stigma

The stigma surrounding food assistance is a significant barrier to CalFresh enrollment among SSI recipients, exacerbated by historical prejudices associated with welfare in the United States (Elkaramany & Edwards, 2022; Cha & Escarce, 2022; Campbell, 2014; Gorman et al., 2013; Sanchez, 2017; Savin, 2023; Savin et al., 2021). In the Hispanic community, welfare often carries negative connotations, likened to begging the government for help or seeking handouts. However, numerous CBOs are actively working to dismantle these stigmas by debunking myths and providing culturally appropriate education. Research indicates that when outreach materials emphasize the removal of stigma associated with benefits, individuals respond

more positively to SNAP outreach compared to responses elicited by standard materials (Cha & Escarce, 2022). For example, Mayra Gutierrez from the Mexican American Opportunity Foundation (MAOF) approaches this by drawing parallels between CalFresh and Social Security benefits:

“I tell [seniors who are retired], ‘Look you're collecting your social security, why are you collecting?’ ‘Well, I worked for X amount of years, and I paid into the system.’ I said, ‘Your taxes were used to fund this program, and when you were young you didn't need it. That's fine. But you live now on a fixed income and it's tough when you're on a fixed income. You're on monthly, you're gonna get what you're gonna get in that, and you have to make that last, right? You have to pay your rent, and you have medications you have to pay for, and you have your utilities. So this program is meant to help you sort of offset all your expenses. And your- I mean, I don't want to use the word entitled to it- but hey, you paid your taxes, right? For all the years that you worked, you're paying to fund this program, then this is the same as Social Security. You're collecting your social, you have no problem collecting it because you paid into the social security system. So this program is here to help you.’ Now, it's not my place to tell anyone what to do or what programs to apply for. I'm just here to educate them so that they can make the best decisions for themselves.

- **Mayra Gutierrez, MAOF**

Additionally, a study by De La Rosa et al. (2021) explores the effectiveness of psychological ownership interventions in increasing claims for government benefits among low-income individuals. By framing benefits as personal entitlements, these interventions significantly enhance participation rates. The research, involving nearly 61,000 participants across four experiments, demonstrates that emphasizing benefits as personal property reduces the aversion to applying, commonly felt as an uncomfortable request for help. Results show that such interventions not only increase engagement with benefit programs but also outperform other psychological strategies like social norms or urgency prompts, making them a cost-effective tool for increasing benefit uptake. This reframing helps challenge the deep-seated stigma by emphasizing that welfare benefits are not just a form of aid but a right earned through years of contribution. This is particularly poignant in light of America's long history of systemic inequalities that have not only created disparities in welfare programs but have also marginalized large segments of the population, making it harder for them to meet basic needs. The shift towards viewing these programs as "deserved support" rather than charity can help reduce stigma and encourage more eligible individuals to apply.



Fact or Fiction: The Role of Misinformation

Another significant barrier for Spanish-speaking individuals is the limited access to accurate and relevant information. Many are unaware of the 2019 policy reform that affects eligibility for CalFresh among SSI recipients, leading to misconceptions about their ability to apply. While some may be aware of the policy changes, they often lack

comprehensive knowledge about the eligibility criteria and erroneously disqualify themselves.⁷ Additionally, there is a common misconception that SSI recipients receive only the minimum CalFresh benefit of \$23, though, in reality, the average benefit for SSI recipient households is around \$146 a month (CAFB, n.d.). Several CBOs have proactively undertaken initiatives to combat this misinformation, educate the community, and disseminate accurate information.

Furthermore, the challenge of effectively disseminating information is often amplified in larger counties, where reaching a widespread population can be difficult. For example, Paulina Soria from San Bernardino County pointed out the difficulty in effectively reaching Spanish speakers across the vast area of the county.⁸ She emphasized the need for more intensive and far-reaching outreach efforts to ensure that accurate information is accessible throughout the entire community. Additionally, a prevalent misconception is that benefit applications must be completed in person at offices.⁹ However, the reality is that most application processes can now be handled online and over the phone. Communicating these online options clearly to the community to enhance access to services and boost enrollment rates in programs like CalFresh is vital.

Misinformation significantly contributes to prevalent misconceptions about CalFresh, particularly among seniors. Often, these older individuals receive second-hand information from friends or neighbors who may have had negative experiences with the application process. For instance, Jenny Lopez from Imperial Valley Food Bank noted,



“One barrier we’ve faced is that seniors often rely on misinformation or myths they’ve heard from neighbors or others. This lack of accurate information leads them to be misinformed and hesitant to apply for benefits like CalFresh because they fear experiencing the same negative outcomes they’ve heard about from others.”

-Jenny Lopez.



There is also a widespread but incorrect belief that CalFresh benefits are exclusively for families with children, further discouraging seniors from applying. Additionally, many hold the misconception that their application could deprive other families of benefits. This sense of potentially "taking someone else's place" within the program causes many eligible individuals to avoid applying altogether (Sanchez, 2017). Addressing these misunderstandings is crucial. CBOs are key in educating the community, clarifying eligibility requirements, and debunking myths about the impacts of applying for CalFresh to ensure that all eligible individuals feel confident to apply without undue concern about affecting others.



A Common Basis: The Importance of Language Access

Federal regulations require state agencies to provide signage in various languages when there is a clear need.¹⁰ In California, county welfare departments are mandated under [MPP § 21-107.212] to supply translated signage for significant non-English-speaking communities. However, one major hurdle for Spanish-speaking SSI recipients in

accessing benefits persists: the language barrier (McDaniel et al., 2023). When applying for CalFresh, Spanish-speaking individuals often face multiple language barriers that can impede their access to necessary food assistance benefits. These challenges include limited Spanish-language resources, where inconsistencies in the availability and accessibility of translated forms and materials across various counties or regions can hinder the ability to find essential information. Advocates illustrated this with an example from BenefitsCal, where terms for utilities like "gas and electrics" are not accurately translated on the Spanish CalFresh Application, and it can be a long process to get CalSAWS to correct it.

Moreover, the use of complex legal and bureaucratic terminology in application forms can be particularly confusing, leading to misunderstandings and potential errors in applications. CBOs also recognize the profound impact of this barrier on elderly SSI recipients, many of whom rely on comprehensive language support. Without such assistance, individuals struggle with tasks like navigating websites, understanding procedural forms, and effectively communicating with service providers. Mayra Gutierrez notes that a majority of her clients are monolingual, a common trait among Spanish-speaking populations. To tackle this issue, CBOs offer extensive end-to-end support to help seniors successfully complete their applications on platforms like BenefitsCal. This support includes compiling necessary documents and guiding clients through each step, ensuring they understand the process and the post-application services available, such as recertification assistance. Additionally, representatives from various CBOs

emphasize a shared goal to ensure that bilingual staff are consistently available to prevent any denial of service. Karla Samayoa from 211 San Diego points out that when bilingual staff are not available, telephone interpreting services are used as a backup. However, the lengthy waiting times associated with these services often deter individuals from seeking assistance.

Despite efforts to provide Spanish-language materials and services, significant language barriers still discourage individuals from applying for CalFresh. Overcoming these obstacles is essential to guaranteeing equitable access to CalFresh and meeting the nutritional needs of diverse communities.



Staying Connected: Centering Mobility Challenges

Transportation and mobility challenges often hinder people with physical disabilities from accessing essential community resources and support services. To effectively serve this often overlooked group, CBOs have devised innovative solutions. For example, Feeding America Riverside|San Bernardino has enhanced its outreach by promoting telephone application services at community events, targeting support specifically towards homebound people. Paulina Soria highlights the integration of CalFresh with "Nourish Now," a home delivery program that brings food directly to the homes of homebound SSI recipients monthly. To broaden reach, the food bank also distributes flyers that provide detailed information about CalFresh and Nourish Now, ensuring that those who

cannot visit food pantries or leave their homes remain well-informed. This strategy emphasizes the importance of telephone-based applications and outreach in enabling access to vital services for SSI recipients, addressing both the challenges of applying for and utilizing CalFresh benefits. Despite these efforts, people with disabilities often remain socially isolated and may not attend community events where such information is shared. Therefore, CBOs and local governments must enhance their outreach initiatives to ensure they reach all community members, mainly the homebound.



Fear and Access: The Effect of Immigration Concerns Among Spanish-Speaking SSI Recipients

Despite SSI eligibility being limited to U.S. citizens, permanent residents, and refugees who are over 65 or disabled, immigration-related fears significantly deter potential beneficiaries, especially in households with mixed immigration statuses. Many Hispanic families, often multi-generational, experience deep anxieties concerning the public charge rule. They worry that participation in public assistance programs could lead to deportation or legal consequences if they are unable to repay any perceived debts. To mitigate these concerns, CBOs have implemented several strategies. For example, the Hunger Coalition has partnered with immigration offices to provide clear, authoritative explanations of immigration laws. Additionally, food banks are pivotal in educating the community about the implications of the public charge rule, emphasizing that benefits claimed on behalf of U.S.-born children do not impact the

parents' immigration status, as the benefits are not received directly by the parents. These efforts are crucial in alleviating fears and encouraging more Spanish-speaking SSI recipients to access the support they are entitled to.

"Your children are eligible for the program because they were born here, but obviously your children can't apply for it—they're children, right? So you have to apply on their behalf, but you're not actually getting the benefit. So it's not going to affect you in the future— and CalFresh at the moment as far as I know is no longer deemed a public charge program." - Mayra Gutierrez

During the Trump administration, heightened fears around public charge led to decreased program participation. Code for America responded by creating an immigrant-focused landing page with a comprehensive FAQ section to address these concerns. A CBO representative highlighted the secretive nature of families during that period, noting,

"Public charge was something that greatly limited people from just sharing their story. Many were reluctant to speak up or disclose information due to fear and secrecy surrounding the topic of public charge. To address this, we offered documents and resource for consultation, understanding the challenges of convincing them that it would impact their situation." - Jenny Lopez

Although the intensity of these fears has lessened, residual distrust remains, according to CBO interviewees. Paulina Soria also emphasized that distrust and fear span all populations, exacerbated by previous governmental policies and a general distrust in the system. This highlights the ongoing need for CBOs to continue building trust and providing accurate, reassuring information to the community.



Closing the Gap: Identifying the Needs of Individuals with Disabilities

Individuals with disabilities often face significant challenges in accessing vital information due to their relative isolation and mobility constraints. This population typically interacts less frequently with supportive services that could provide up-to-date information about CalFresh eligibility and enrollment processes. This limited interaction contributes to a substantial information gap, exacerbating the underutilization of CalFresh's existing rules, such as those pertaining to medical expense deductions and other eligibility criteria (Carlson et al., 2017; Gorman et al., 2013). Moreover, there is a prevalent stigma associated with disability and reliance on public assistance, which can deter individuals from seeking help. The combination of informational barriers and societal stigma creates a formidable challenge that requires targeted interventions to ensure that individuals with disabilities have equitable access to food assistance programs like CalFresh. To address these issues, policymakers and community organizations must implement strategies that enhance outreach and education efforts, specifically tailored to meet the unique needs of the disabled population. This could involve the use of

accessible communication tools, partnerships with disability advocacy groups, and training for social service providers to better understand and address the specific barriers faced by this community.

Process Barriers

In this section, we will discuss the process-based barriers faced during the CalFresh application process. It is important to note in our discussion that administrative and process barriers are a product of systemic barriers that disproportionately burden disadvantaged groups, exacerbating social inequality. Moynihan et al. (2015) examine the concept of administrative burden and its profound impact on citizen interactions with the state. These burdens include learning, psychological, and compliance costs—efforts and stresses involved in understanding, accessing, and adhering to government programs. The authors argue that these burdens are often not mere bureaucratic side effects but are strategically used or unintentionally created through political decisions, affecting access to services and shaping public perception of the government. In enumerating these barriers, we hope to stress the impact of process barriers on enrollment rates.



Navigating the CalFresh Maze: Challenges, Inefficiencies, and Distrust in the Application Process

Applying for benefits such as CalFresh is notoriously complex and daunting, involving multiple steps like gathering

documents, undergoing interviews, and submitting further documentation. These challenges are particularly acute for SSI recipients, with many CBOs highlighting document assembly as a significant obstacle. Amy Dierlam from River City Food Bank reports frequent mail delivery issues that cause missed renewals and unexpected benefit cuts, leading to urgent and stressful situations for recipients. The inefficiency of the call system, marked by long wait times and frequent disconnections, exacerbates these challenges, hindering effective communication and resolution of issues. Jodie Berger criticizes call centers for their universally long wait times and high rate of dropped calls, which make telephone-based applications particularly challenging.

Similarly, Lucy Kwon from San Diego 211 and Jenn Tracy highlight instances where benefits are wrongly denied due to staff misunderstandings or incorrect applications of rules. They also note that while electronic verifications are designed to streamline the verification process, their application remains inconsistent among workers, leading to unnecessary requests for additional documentation. These procedural inefficiencies are a widespread issue, as evidenced by the Massachusetts SNAP gap, where the majority of applications are rejected due to procedural mistakes. Additionally, required interviews frequently fail to occur due to scheduling conflicts, communication breakdowns, or simple inefficiencies within the system. A more supportive and transparent system that guides applicants effectively and rebuilds trust through well-trained, culturally competent staff is essential. This would not only streamline the application process but also ensure it is more accessible and less frustrating for all applicants,

particularly those most in need. Furthermore, the poor customer service reported in many interactions with county office staff also significantly deters potential applicants. Mayra Gutierrez notes that the often unwelcoming atmosphere in county offices further discourages engagement with necessary services. Other CBO representatives echo this sentiment, feeling that the attitudes of some county workers make navigating the application process unduly challenging. Paulina Soria compared the atmosphere in county offices to that of the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), describing it as uninviting and unsympathetic, and shared insights into the emotional and practical challenges applicants face:



I believe that sometimes we get so many people who are grateful that we offer this service; that we help them get started. They sound so appreciative. They've had past experiences where they've applied and had a bad experience with a county worker. They were either rude to them or they didn't help at all. I believe it's just distrust in the system, in the county, due to those negative experiences and they don't want to go through that. They don't want to put in the work and then be told they didn't qualify."

- Paulina Soria



These insights highlight the need for a more supportive and transparent application process that not only guides applicants through each step but also rebuilds trust in the system by ensuring county workers are well-trained in customer service and cultural competence.

Digital Divides and Accessibility Hurdles: Challenges Facing SSI Recipients



Discussions with CBOs have highlighted a significant digital divide affecting the accessibility and usability of online platforms for CalFresh applications. This gap particularly impacts Spanish-speaking SSI recipients, including seniors who often lack modern digital devices and may only possess basic phones incapable of sending or receiving text messages. Mayra Gutierrez points out that many clients lack basic digital literacy; they do not have internet access at home, lack familiarity with computers, or even understand how to use email. The requirement for an email account and the ability to navigate complex multi-factor authentication processes on platforms like BenefitsCal can be daunting for those not versed in technology. Additionally, their access to the internet is frequently unreliable or limited by the data plans provided through programs like Medi-Cal or CalFresh, which are often insufficient for completing online processes.

Even when individuals are able to digitally connect to these programs, they are not always accessible to users with cognitive disabilities, visual impairments, or hearing difficulties. These barriers can prevent them from successfully engaging with essential services. Francesca Costa from Code for America stressed the importance of inclusive design in online applications. She advocated for comprehensive accessibility audits to ensure that platforms do not unintentionally exclude users with visual impairments.

The implementation of BenefitsCal has also introduced new challenges. Users frequently

encounter technical issues and system outages that further complicate the application process. Eileen Cubanski from the County Welfare Directors Association of California (CWDA) acknowledges the frustration with the new system and hopes for improvements as users gain more experience and the platform evolves. However, inadequate training and support for navigating the system persists. These stark technology gaps prevent potential applicants from independently accessing online services, making in-person and phone assistance from CBOs crucial for their participation in programs like CalFresh.

Administrative Barriers



Connecting the Dots: County Service Accessibility

How accessible the CalFresh program is in each county can depend heavily on the particular county administration and the applicant's ability to contact the county over the phone or in person. A common challenge expressed across counties was how difficult it can be for SSI recipients to reach the county over the phone due to long wait times caused by staffing shortages and increased demand for county services. Sometimes, clients can spend hours on the phone waiting to contact the county, only to have their call dropped before connecting with a caseworker. As a result, CBOs play a crucial role in CalFresh uptake by assisting clients to apply for benefits partly because they might be easier to contact. Interviews with CBOs from Los Angeles and Sacramento counties mentioned how, like their clients, they also face long wait times

.when trying to call the county, which can take up a significant amount of their time and limit their ability to assist other clients.¹³ Despite having one of the largest CBO networks, Los Angeles County experiences a large disconnect between CBO and county services.

"We're constantly playing phone tag with the county. I'm talking to their supervisors, and all they do is leave a voicemail to the applicant. There's a huge disconnect. I'll be on hold, working on other things, while my phone is on hold trying to get through to a county worker, but in that time, I could be doing more outreach." -Wendy Ortega, Community Services Unlimited

In an attempt to address this problem and increase access, San Diego has offered a creative solution by having a dedicated phone number for CBOs to call that allows them to connect with a county caseworker to discuss CalFresh cases quickly. CBOs can register for a personal identification number (PIN) that allows them to access this line and directly connect with county workers to check the status of applications and confirm if verification documents have been received, among other things (San Diego Health and Human Services Agency, n.d.). Additionally, at the request of CBOs and other stakeholders, the county also established a dedicated line for scheduling and rescheduling CalFresh interview appointments.¹⁴ There seems to be a mixed bag here with a CBO's relationship with their county. CBOs in some counties noted having direct access to their county, while others have received little or no support.

BEST PRACTICES

We define best practices as strategies that push forward individual access to CalFresh benefits. As part of our analysis, we reviewed the literature and our interview transcripts to identify common themes related to success in enrolling SSI recipients in CalFresh, as well as common themes around existing barriers to increasing enrollment. In this section, we propose best practices that attempt to further expand on existing best practices as well as propose new solutions to address existing barriers. We will divide these practices into three groups: administrative, customer service, and outreach solutions.

Administrative Solutions

Standardize Administrative Access

CBO access phone lines have proven successful in San Diego County, allowing CBOs to more effectively use their time to assist clients due to decreased wait times when calling to check status or resolve issues with applications and cases they manage. San Diego and Santa Clara counties also grant selected CBOs ready-only access to the CalSAWS platform. In many cases, this allows them to eliminate the need for calls altogether, better understand what information is needed to complete applications, and renew or reinstate client benefits. Along with saving CBOs time, this would also save county workers time and free them up to assist other members of the public. By streamlining access to this

information, CBOs will be better equipped to assist clients and, in turn, increase their approval rates for applications.

1 Standardize the use of CBO-county access lines: CDSS should provide guidance, support, and resources to counties to establish CBO access lines for trusted CBO partners in all counties. Counties could model their systems off of the San Diego system and establish eligibility criteria to be able to register.

2 Grant CBOs CalSAWS Access: All counties should establish a list of trusted CBO partners who take a high volume of CalFresh applications or provide significant CalFresh assistance to community members and give them read-only access to the CalSAWS platform. Eligibility criteria should mirror that of the CBO Access.

Incorporate Data Matching to Target Enrollment “In-reach” Efforts

In-reach refers to engaging people already utilizing other safety net programs, such as SSI, in efforts to increase CalFresh enrollment. In the county expansion efforts in Los Angeles and San Francisco counties, data matching was used to target SSI recipients who were not enrolled in the CalFresh program. In San Francisco, the city and county Human Services Agency pulled

lists of clients identified as having SSI but not CalFresh benefits. They then sent these clients letters advising them of their potential eligibility for CalFresh. They followed up with phone call outreach to connect with clients and either take their CalFresh application over the phone or direct them to other ways they could apply.¹⁵ In Los Angeles, similar mailers were sent out to anyone on MediCal (all SSI recipients are MediCal recipients) who were not receiving CalFresh, including a list of CBOs who could assist with applications. As part of this outreach, the county tapped into the large network of CBOs in Los Angeles to ensure it covered the whole county.¹⁶ By targeting inreach to this population, counties can ensure that recipients were not only aware of their potential eligibility for the program but were also contacted by outreach workers who could assist them with completing their application. In San Francisco, the county relied on assistance from San Diego 211 to contact SSI recipients and take applications. A similar model could be employed across other counties where county employees do not have the capacity for this extra workload. Additionally, CDSS has used this strategy on a state level to send out informational postcards to SSI recipients advising them of the change in eligibility rules in the lead-up to expansion. It is important to note, though, that these types of campaigns would require significant coordination to ensure that county welfare offices and CBOs are not overwhelmed by the influx of new applications that result from these efforts.

1

Targeted In-reach: County welfare offices, in collaboration with SSA, should regularly pull lists of SSI recipients who are not currently enrolled in CalFresh programs and use these lists for targeted outreach by the county. The county can better determine where further outreach is still needed by tracking how many of these contacted recipients respond to contact attempts. CDSS could provide leadership in these efforts by pulling these CalFresh lists for all counties, assisting with getting SSI lists from SSA and sharing best practices of in-reach models that have previously been successful.

Invest in Relationships Between CBOs and Counties

Across interviews, the strength of the relationship between CBOs and counties has been highlighted as both a challenge and a key to success. In particular, San Francisco and San Diego were highlighted as having long-standing and close relationships with CBOs, which are key to their success in coordinated outreach and enrollment efforts. By fostering trust in one another, both parties can improve their work together toward the goal of increasing CalFresh enrollment among SSI recipients.

1

Formalize County-CBO relationships: Counties should take steps to formalize relationships between key CBOs to ensure effective communication and collaboration on enrollment efforts. By formalizing relationships, counties can connect with policy and advocacy teams at CBOs to stay informed about potential policy changes and advocacy efforts related to CalFresh enrollment. Better

- relationships will also allow for coordination so counties are prepared for the increased applications or contacts from people interested in applying as a result of targeted outreach efforts.

Customer Service Solutions

Improve customer service and access in state agencies

CBOs like MAOF and Imperial Food Bank have recognized the critical role of empathetic and effective customer service in facilitating access to public benefits. By training county staff to be understanding and supportive, county agencies can significantly improve the application experience for individuals, particularly those who may approach the system with hesitation or feelings of stigma. Mayra Gutierrez emphasizes the necessity of customer service excellence, noting that the demeanor and attitudes of staff can significantly influence whether individuals feel encouraged or deterred from applying for benefits.

- 1 Standardize Customer Service Training:** State agencies should implement comprehensive training programs emphasizing empathy, cultural competence, and practical communication skills across all customer service platforms. This training should draw from CBO and customer recommendations and be standardized to ensure consistency in service quality regardless of the county or region.

- 2 Cultural Sensitivity Training:** Government agencies should prioritize cultural sensitivity training for staff members who interact with community members. This training should encompass an understanding of diverse cultural backgrounds, languages, customs, and values to ensure respectful and effective communication with all individuals.

- 3 Executive Actions to Improve Service Delivery:** Following the lead of recent federal initiatives, state governments should consider executive orders or legislative actions aimed at transforming customer experience in public service delivery. This could include directives addressing systemic issues such as underfunding and understaffing, significantly impacting service quality.

- 4 Feedback Mechanisms:** Establish transparent and accessible feedback mechanisms that allow community members to provide input on government programs and CBO services. This could involve creating advisory committees, conducting surveys, or setting up dedicated helplines for community inquiries and feedback.

Outreach Solutions

Reimagine Outreach Partnerships

Word of mouth has proven to be a highly effective tool in increasing CalFresh applications, as described by Isabel Andrade from Imperial Food Bank. The presence of their team at local clinics has not only familiarized regular clinic visitors with their services but also attracted newcomers who were unaware of what CalFresh offers.

Their strategic placement at clinics coinciding with doctor’s appointments provided an excellent opportunity to distribute flyers and engage directly with potential applicants. This approach was complemented by a targeted social media campaign to inform SSI recipients about their eligibility for CalFresh, significantly boosting outreach and application rates.

“When patients visited their doctors, we provided them with flyer about CalFresh, some individuals were already aware of our presence every Monday and would come specifically to apply for CalFresh benefits. We engaged with others who were unfamiliar with us and didn’t know about CalFresh, witnessing a significant number of people reaching out to us for assistance, I recall our successful social media campaign as well.” - Isabel Andrade

Moreover, Francesca Costa Mendez from CFA also highlighted the role of peer networks, particularly among Latin American communities in the Bay Area. The use of promotoras—community members trained to provide primary health education—illustrates the power of community-driven efforts in spreading information effectively through trusted word of mouth. Other organizations like Second Harvest in Silicon Valley¹⁷ and MAOF¹⁸ stated that partnering with local businesses and trusted establishments also contributed to increased trust within the community. They stated that by going to common community spaces like the local doctor’s office or supermarket, they could directly target folks in their community and increase their reliability.

Moreover, this sentiment builds on the idea of reliability and consistency. These networks are crucial in culturally cohesive communities where informal communication channels can significantly impact public awareness and participation in programs like CalFresh.

- 1 Partnerships with Local Health Departments:** Strengthen partnerships between CBOs and local health departments to ensure that individuals visiting for health services are also screened for food insecurity and informed about CalFresh, as well as develop referral systems.
- 2 Regular Presence at Community Centers:** Similar to the practice at Imperial Food Bank, CDSS should encourage and support regular CBO presence at local clinics and community centers. This would facilitate direct engagement with potential applicants, providing them with information and assistance in a familiar and trusted setting.

Commit to Re-shaping Community Ties

Our interviews held common themes surrounding general government mistrust and a lack of community. Successful counties, such as Los Angeles County, held successful numbers in the initial CalFresh rollout. After speaking with several representatives from these counties, they noted that consistency was key to building a relationship with their community. Wendy Ortega at Community Services Unlimited, a non-profit organization in South Central Los Angeles, stated that their outreach efforts focused on community engagement. Thus,

community members were more likely to trust their organization due to their visibility.



*“Building that trust was really important because they could see my face [and say] I can trust her. So I think just being actually present within the community is really, really important. [...] So consistency is really key here. Consistency.” - **Maria Huerta, Second Harvest of Silicon Valley***

The following recommendations build on these sentiments and provide tangible solutions for addressing the general mistrust in government and government agencies.

1 Consistent Engagement: Government agencies and CBOs should commit to ongoing and consistent engagement with community members rather than relying solely on sporadic outreach efforts. This could include regular community meetings, feedback sessions, and opportunities for community members to provide input on program design and implementation.

2 End-to-End Application Care: Both government agencies and CBOs should provide comprehensive support to individuals throughout the application process, from initial inquiry to final approval. This may involve offering assistance with completing application forms, providing guidance on required documentation, and advocating on behalf of applicants if issues arise.

LEGISLATIVE RECOMMENDATIONS

Increase the Minimum Benefit

California should consider increasing the minimum benefit that eligible CalFresh beneficiaries receive by permanently expanding and authorizing the California's CalFresh Minimum Nutrition Benefit Pilot Program so that all CalFresh recipients receive a minimum CalFresh benefit of \$50. During interviews, county stakeholders commonly mentioned the minimum benefit amount as a barrier to incentivizing community members to apply, especially for those discouraged by the administrative burden associated with applying. A higher minimum benefit could generate more enthusiasm among CalFresh-eligible SSI recipients for applying.

"I get SSI folks that say I don't want to do all this for \$23, and then we have to talk about how to stretch those dollars- such as Market Match or how to shop on a limited budget." - Amy Dierlam

Extend Interview Waivers Indefinitely

The federal government should indefinitely extend the pandemic-era policy, enabling county caseworkers to waive the requirement for conducting a phone interview as part of the application process. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)

granted states the flexibility to forego interviews that are typically required at the time of initial application and recertification, contingent on state agencies confirming identities and households submitting essential verifications, such as income documentation.

Moreover, raising the minimum benefit amount would have the added benefit of conferring greater nutrition assistance to Californians in need. Temporarily expanding CalFresh benefits during the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on reducing poverty and improving families' economic mobility (Malagon and Thorman, 2023).

"The interview waiver has been really helpful during this time, (although this ended as of March 31st), especially for SSI recipients to allow the county to just finish processing without having to make that call and have that conversation." - Amy Dierlam

Stakeholders noted that this flexibility has streamlined the application process and helped reduce barriers to access.¹⁹ In instances where caseworkers can verify all necessary information without this labor-intensive process, they should maintain the ability to approve benefits without speaking with applicants directly.

Extend the Elderly Simplified Application Project Waiver

California should minimize reporting requirements for SSI recipients, which can be arduous, especially for seniors and those with disabilities. Simplifying requirements can help ensure that those receiving food assistance do not experience disruption or loss of benefits. One stakeholder mentioned that, especially for those on a fixed income, the state should consider doing away entirely with income-related reporting requirements for recertification of benefits.

Currently, California operates an Elderly Simplified Application Project (ESAP), which is designed to streamline the application and recertification processes for CalFresh for elderly and/or disabled households with no earned income (Legal Services of California, n.d.b). The ESAP waiver removes the recertification interview requirement, although households are still required to participate in an initial interview. The program also allows for data matching to minimize the need for clients to verify information manually and extends the recertification period to 36 months. Additionally, ESAP eliminates the need for annual reporting, specifically the SAR-7 reports. This program is set to continue through September 30, 2026. California should seek to implement the ESAP waiver on a permanent basis. Short of which, the state should seek to extend the waiver beyond its current expiration in 2026.

Implement a Combined Application Project

California should request a waiver from USDA to implement a CAP project. In other states, CAPs have been shown to reduce administrative burden and costs as well as increase SNAP enrollment among SSI

recipients. Because the CAP application process eliminates the need for clients to access a SNAP office, CAPs can reduce workload and increase capacity for SNAP caseworkers (Weinstein-Tull and Jones, 2017). Implementing a CAP, therefore, promises to potentially improve the delivery of CalFresh benefits more broadly. Moreover, SNAP and SSA staff report that the implementation of CAPs led to increased efficiency and accuracy in benefit delivery (Negoita et al., 2022).

In an interview for this report, a stakeholder mentioned the impact of implementing a CAP in Massachusetts on reducing barriers and administrative burden:



“Massachusetts implemented CAP in 2005. For eligible SSI claimants, CAP has eliminated the need for the Massachusetts state agency to collect and process verifications or to conduct a SNAP application interview. SSI claimants do not need to verify their residence, immigration status, or income. They are issued an EBT card, and able to simply go food shopping. This reduces significant access barriers for SSI households and administrative tasks on SNAP state agencies”

- Pat Baker, Mass Law Reform Institute

Given that California only expanded CalFresh eligibility to its SSI population in 2019 and that the state’s SSI recipients remain significantly under enrolled relative to the national average, implementing a CAP has the potential to be especially effective in California.

Proposed state legislation would automate

the enrollment of qualifying SSI recipients in CalFresh and require the state to obtain a waiver from the USDA, if necessary, to fully implement the bill's provisions.²⁰ California may be facing a unique policy window to design and implement a CAP with a willing federal partner. In December 2021, the Biden administration issued a series of executive orders to improve public benefits access by reducing burdens for both applicants and state agencies.²¹ Among other provisions, the executive order includes funding to simplify SNAP application and eligibility determination systems. Seemingly, developing an effective CAP program in California, which serves the largest SSI population in the country, would align with the current administration's priorities around public service delivery.



Photo Credit: Julie Leopo, Voice of OC

CONCLUSION

As CAFB looks to update its SSI CalFresh Expansion Dashboard, we hope that this report can provide an overview of the current challenges SSI recipients face related to accessing and maintaining CalFresh benefits and where California and key counties currently stand in their enrollment efforts. The challenges faced by individuals with disabilities and Spanish-speaking SSI recipients in accessing CalFresh highlight the urgent need for tailored interventions and legislative reforms. Administrative burdens, digital divides, and systemic barriers significantly restrict access to essential food assistance. Best practices such as legislative simplification seen in SB 882, the creation of accessible online platforms, and effective community-based outreach have proven crucial in overcoming these obstacles. These strategies streamline application and recertification processes and ensure that outreach is both accessible and responsive to the diverse needs of these vulnerable populations.

Practice and policy adjustments should continue to focus on enhancing program accessibility for all disability types and improving the customer service experience for Spanish-speaking communities. Key findings from literature reviews and qualitative data analysis emphasize the necessity of simplifying access to benefits, improving customer service, and employing targeted community outreach.

Implementing CAPs, integrating benefit screeners during periodic reviews, and fostering collaborations with trusted community-based organizations are recommended. Therefore, stakeholders at all levels—including policymakers, government agencies, and community organizations—must actively implement these strategies to promote equity, improve access to essential services, and enhance these groups' economic well-being and food security. This call to action underscores the importance of prioritizing targeted interventions to ensure that the benefits of CalFresh are accessible to those who need them most, contributing to a healthier, more inclusive community.



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FOOTNOTES

1. CalFresh is the name used in California for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Throughout this report we will refer to the program as CalFresh except for instances when we reference the program on a national level.
2. From an interview with Brian Kaiser, California Department of Social Services on March 20, 2024
3. As of 2015
4. See Appendix A: Interviewee List for the full list of government agencies and key stakeholders we interviewed.
5. See more information here: <https://calfresh.guide/reasonable-accommodations-for-disabilities/>
6. From an interview with Jodie Berger, Western Center on Law and Poverty, on February 20, 2024.
7. From an interview with Mayra Gutierrez on March 22, 2024.
8. From an interview with Paulina Soria, Feeding America Riverside|San Bernardino, on April 12, 2024.
9. From an interview with Paulina Soria on April 12, 2024.
10. This is established when a local office serves an area with five percent or more low-income households speaking a particular non-English language and do not have an adult proficient in English as a second language.
11. The public charge rule is a U.S. immigration policy used to determine if immigrants might become primarily dependent on government assistance, potentially affecting their eligibility for visas or to become permanent residents. It evaluates various factors, such as age, health, financial status, and education, to predict future dependence on public assistance. Historically, it only focused on cash assistance and long-term care, but recent expansions (now mostly reverted) considered a broader array of benefits like Medicaid and SNAP.
12. From an interview with Becky Silva, CAFB, on January 29, 2024.
13. From an interview with Amy Dierlam on March 15, 2024 and Wendy Ortega on March 5, 2024.
14. From an interview with Karla Samayoa and Lucy Kwon on March 14, 2024.

15. Interview with Karla Samayoa and Lucy Kwon on March 14, 2024.
16. Interview with Mayra Gutierrez on March 22, 2024.
17. From an interview with Maria Huerta on March 6, 2024.
18. From an interview with Mayora Gutierrez on March 22, 2024
19. Interview with Amy Dierlam on March 15, 2024
20. From an interview with Jenn Tracey, JTracy Consulting on March 19, 2024
21. More information regarding AB-1968 available at:
https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240AB1968
22. More information available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/04/09/fact-sheet-the-biden-harris-administration-highlights-recent-successes-in-improving-customer-service-and-delivery-for-safety-net-benefits-identifies-opportunities-for-states-for-further-improvement/>

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interviewee list

Name	Company
Pat Baker	Mass Law Reform Institute
Gabby Davidson	California Association of Food Banks
Trinh Phan	Justice in Aging
Becca Gonzales	Western Center on Law & Poverty
Jodie Berger	Western Center on Law & Poverty
Eileen Cubanski	County Welfare Directors Association of California
Francesca Costa	Code for America: GetCalFresh
Becky Silva	California Association of A Food Banks
Stephanie Muniz	CDA, AAA
Brian Kaiser	CDSS
Andrea Brayboy	CDSS

Kat Yang	CDSS
Jenn Tracy	JTracy Consulting
Wendy Ortega	Community Services Unlimited
Mayra Gutierrez	Mexican American Opportunity Foundation
Amy Dierlam	River City Food Bank
Maria Huerta	Second Harvest of Silicon Valley
Karla Samayoa	211 San Diego
Lucy Kwon	211 San Diego
Isabel Andrade	Imperial Valley Food Bank
Jenny Lopez	Imperial Valley Food Bank
Paulina Soria	Feeding America Riverside San Bernardino
Kim McCoy Wade	NA
Guillermina Cano	FIND Food Bank
Linda Souza	Silicon Valley Independent Living Center

APPENDIX B: STRATEGIC GUIDE FOR ACTION

The chart below outlines which specific stakeholders can take action on the best practices and legislative recommendations discussed in this report. We hope this toolkit empowers policymakers, county officials, CBOs and other stakeholders to make a positive impact in addressing the barriers in CalFresh enrollment amongst SSI recipients.

Entity	Action
<p style="text-align: center;">CBOs</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistent Engagement With Community Members • End-to-End Application Care • Feedback Mechanisms • Formalize County-CBO relationships • Partnerships with Local Health Departments • Regular Presence at Community Centers
<p style="text-align: center;">CDSS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular Presence at Community Centers • Standardize the use of CBO-county access lines
<p style="text-align: center;">Counties</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cultural Sensitivity Training • Formalize County-CBO relationships • Grant CBOs CalSAWS Access • Standardize Customer Service Training • Standardize the use of CBO-county access lines • Targeted In-reach • Executive Actions to Improve Service Delivery
<p style="text-align: center;">Federal Government</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extend Interview Waivers Indefinitely • Targeted In-reach
<p style="text-align: center;">Government Agencies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistent Engagement with Community Members • Cultural Sensitivity Training • End-to-End Application Care • Feedback Mechanisms
<p style="text-align: center;">State Agencies</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Partnerships with Local Health Departments • Standardize Customer Service Training
<p style="text-align: center;">State Government</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the CalFresh Minimum Benefit

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Bryson is from North Carolina and is a current first year Master of Public Policy Student at the UC Berkeley Goldman School of Public Policy. He graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with a BA in Political Science and Global Studies with a minor in Portuguese. Since graduating he has worked with the Peace Corps in Mozambique and as a SSI claims specialist with the Social Security Administration in San Diego. His policy interests lie in social safety net and international development policy and improving policy design to better meet the needs of the populations it intends to serve.



Carlos Flores - florescarlosab@berkeley.edu

Carlos Flores was born and raised in the Bay Area in Fremont CA. Growing up he attended public school, went to community college, and also attended UC Berkeley as a transfer student where he majored in Economics and minored in Education. In undergrad, he participated in UCDC, where he interned at the Department of Education in Washington DC. This was where his passion for Education Policy began. After graduating undergrad, he continued his work in education and moved to NYC to work for the New York City Department of Education as a Data Analyst, a position he truly loved. Carlos hopes to combine his interest in data analytics with his passion for education policy to continue working towards increasing educational outcomes for students of color in the state of California.



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Cinthia is a first-year candidate pursuing a Master's degree in Public Policy at UC Berkeley's Goldman School of Public Policy. Her main interest lies in mitigating the impacts of climate change, particularly in underserved communities. Cinthia holds a bachelor's degree in Sociology - Organizational Studies from UC Davis. Currently, she is working as a policy analyst at UC Davis' Western Cooling and Efficiency Center and acts as a liaison between engineers and disadvantaged communities to increase accessibility to affordable and cleaner technology. Cinthia aims to broaden her expertise and knowledge to improve the quality of life for underrepresented communities beyond environmental and energy initiatives.



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Joyce is a proud Angeleno from Highland Park, Los Angeles. She graduated from UC Berkeley with a BA in Political Science and a BA in Data Science, then worked briefly as an International Student Advisor and DSO on campus. Currently, she is volunteering at a Bay Area based nonprofit as a policy researcher, leading their board of educators in an effort to increase equity across their student-facing programs. Her interdisciplinary framework allows her to tackle policy areas from an intersectionality- focused lens, zeroing in on factors of socioeconomic status and race. Joyce hopes to increase educational opportunity for all learners despite their ability to perform under a standardized system.



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Max is a San Francisco native and current Master of Public Policy student at the UC Berkeley Goldman School. He is a proud California Community College transfer and graduated from UC Berkeley with a BA in Political Science in 2017. Max spent four years working on Capitol Hill, including most recently as an education policy staffer. His primary policy interests relate to education and socioeconomic mobility, including higher education access, the cost of college, equitable student outcomes, and student loan debt and repayment.